

# Entheogens in the Study of Religious Experiences: Current Status\*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article addresses the potential significance of archetypal and mystical experiences sometimes reported when entheogens are employed in supportive, legal research contexts. This area of research, which has been difficult to pursue in recent decades due to Federal legislation and concerns about drug-abuse, is presented as a frontier in the psychology of religious experience that could prove to have profound implications for advancing our understanding of spiritual dimensions of consciousness. Consideration is given to how the action of entheogens may be understood, the question of experiential validity, the apparent universality of both archetypal and mystical experiences, and initial theological reflections.

**KEY WORDS:** entheogens; mystical experiences; archetypal experiences; consciousness.

## *The abuse of an instrument and resistance to paradigm change*

In a scene from Bertolt Brecht's 1939 play *Galileo*, by carefully observing the moons of Jupiter through a newly-invented instrument called the telescope, Galileo has noted that the moons periodically disappear as they rotate behind the planet. In conjunction with his other observations and calculations, he concludes that the geocentric model of the universe presumed to be valid by his contemporaries—not to mention the psychological and spiritual *Weltanschauung* that accompanied it—is limited and outmoded. Beyond the alleged beauty of the crystalline spheres of Ptolemaic Astronomy, the universe is infinitely more vast and awesome. Ten years previously Bruno had been burned

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at the stake for uttering the same heresy, but Galileo now has evidence to support this claim.

So, in Brecht's play, Galileo stands beside his telescope in the company of the authorities of his day: a philosopher, a theologian and a mathematician. He invites them to look through the instrument and see for themselves that a marvelous new paradigm of reality awaits their confirmation of his discovery. However, the scholars demur and ultimately refuse his invitation, for they are convinced that they already know the truth about the structure of reality. They quote the divine Aristotle and the church fathers, all who say that the geocentric system is valid. Someone comments that, if they humored Galileo and looked through his silly tube, and if they thought they saw what he claims to be true, they'd know it was only—a hallucination. Telescopes, after all, have a very bad reputation as they've been selling very well in Amsterdam and voyeurs have been using them to spy on women.

The scholars leave Galileo isolated and frustrated. Later in the play other authorities censor him and force him to recant. Though he crumbles under the political power and the conceptual paradigm of his day, he knows within himself that the vistas he has seen still are valid and someday will be rediscovered by scientists in future generations.

In the scholarly literature on the sacred molecules we now call "entheogens", (Jesse, 2001) but previously have called many different names (including psychedelics, psycholytics, hallucinogens, phantastica, psychotomimetics, mysticomimetics and psychodysleptics), various writers—including Alan Watts (1962) and Stanislav Grof (1975)—have likened these substances to telescopes or microscopes, considering them to be incredibly valuable tools if we learn to use them wisely and responsibly. As the telescope is to astronomy, or the microscope is to biology, so are entheogens to psychiatry and especially, to the psychology of religious experience. As the cosmos is not within the telescope, nor the contents of cells within the microscope, so the remarkable alternative states of consciousness encountered during the action of entheogens, including mystical states and archetypal visions, are not intrinsic to the substances themselves.

This metaphor begins to break down when we seek spatio-temporal locations for the content experienced during the action of entheogens for, though we may be able to pinpoint the parts of our brains that manifest increased activity when different states of consciousness occur, the intuitive, *noetic* knowledge that accompanies profound transcendental experiences typically includes a conviction that the spiritual world is beyond the Kantian categories of Time, Space, Causality and Substance. I'm reminded of Karl Jaspers' (1954) repetitive reminder that, "Human beings are fundamentally more than they know, or ever can know, about themselves."

When Aldous Huxley (1963) published *The Doors of Perception* in 1954, calling attention to the profundity of the mystical glimpses into the nature of reality he personally had experienced during the action of mescaline—the

psychoactive ingredient of the Peyote cactus used today in religious rituals of the Native American Church—a well respected British, Roman Catholic, scholar of comparative religions, R.C. Zaehner (1954), countered Huxley's assertions by publishing an article entitled "The Menace of Mescaline." Zaehner stressed the difference between what he called "monistic mysticism" and "theistic mysticism" and claimed that "artificial interference with consciousness" could have nothing to do with what Christians call "The Beatific Vision." Not comprehending the potency of variables of set and setting, Zaehner (1961) eventually went so far as to take mescaline himself and publish a report of his experience to prove his point. It is true that he did not experience anything close to the Beatific Vision during the period of time mescaline was active in his system; the report he published described mild aesthetic imagery, typically encountered with very low dosage or with persons who have strong psychological defenses. In spite of the brilliance of his mind, Zaehner found himself caught up irrationally in the Roman Church's lack of knowledge and fear of entheogens, well captured in the following confessional that Padre Nicholas de Leon, a Spanish missionary in Mexico, wrote for priests to use with penitent Indians (LeBarre, 1938):

Art thou a sooth-sayer? Dost thou foretell events by reading omens, interpreting dreams, or by tracing circles and figures on water? . . . Dost thou suck the blood of others? Dost thou wander about at night calling upon demons to help thee? Hast thou drunk peyote or given it to others to drink ...?

### *Entheogenic research and alternative states of consciousness*

During my career as a clinical psychologist and psychologist of religion, I have had the unique good fortune to be able to work within legal research frameworks and personally to interact with many different human beings while entheogens were active in their systems. Most of my experience has centered around research studies (Kurland, Savage, Pahnke, Grof, & Olsson, 1971; Rhead et al., 1977; Richards et al., 1972, 1997; Richards, 1980; Savage & McCabe, 1973; Yensen & Dryer, 1995; Yensen et al., 1976), employing lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), dipropyltryptamine (DPT), methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDA) or psilocybin (the active ingredient of the sacred mushrooms used in religious ceremonies for at least 2000 years in Mexico and Central America) as potential catalysts of psychotherapeutic processes and as tools in the study of consciousness itself. I have had the honor of offering my presence, support and guidance to these persons as they have experienced many different realms of consciousness, ranging from sensory-aesthetic to personal-psychodynamic, psychotic, perinatal, visionary-archetypal, and classically mystical states. Over the years, in collaboration with colleagues, I have sought

to develop and refine the art of preparing persons for experiences with entheogens in ways that maximize the potential for safety and benefit, and minimize the likelihood of states of consciousness characterized by confusion, panic or paranoia, which I choose to label “psychotic.” Archetypal visions and unitive, mystical forms of consciousness are very different from the everyday awareness most of us experience, but I would not use the label “psychotic” in reference to them. In accordance with Abraham Maslow’s (1964) discussions of major peak experiences, I believe that many of these experiences truly may be revelatory and indicative of exceptional mental health and the so-called “higher reaches of human nature”.

In this article, I will discuss a few of the observations my colleagues and I have made over the years that could have relevance for the psychology of religion. All of these observations are subject to continuing research, which I earnestly hope some readers might become motivated to pursue.

### *Concerning the question of experiential validity*

To address the validity of the archetypal and mystical states of consciousness reported during the action of entheogens, I must preface these observations by noting that “any life experience is simply that: an experience. It may be complete or incomplete, utterly convincing or mildly suggestive, pure or distorted; fresh and surprising or influenced by many hopes and suggestions. The truth-value one assigns to any life experience is a matter of private judgement and faith” (Richards, 2002). I would apply this same attitude to alternative states of consciousness that occur during periods of prayer or meditation, during times of sensory isolation or sensory overload, during exceptional moments in artistic or athletic performance, or during sacred moments in religious liturgies, sexual interaction or natural childbirth. I would not presume to judge the sacredness or validity of any experience that another chooses to treasure, although I might question the integration or interpretation of someone’s experience if that person felt compelled to engage in behavior that I considered destructive.

That there appear to be correlations between neurochemical activities in our brains and various experiences, sacred or secular, is fascinating (d’Aquili & Newberg, 1999; Newberg & d’Aquili, 2001), as is the knowledge that dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a powerful entheogen, normally is secreted in the biological chemical factories within each of our skulls, and may well be a factor in so called “spontaneous” religious and mystical experiences (Strassman, 2001). It is reasonable to hypothesize that the biochemical substrate of experiencing always has been influenced and changed by traditional meditative practices, including focused attention, special postures, sleep deprivation, fasting and particular diets, and patterns of breathing that alter blood chemistry.

*The universality of archetypal and mystical experiences*

It is important to stress that both visionary-archetypal and classically mystical experiences appear to be accessible for many, if not most, persons during the action of entheogens in supportive settings. Archetypal visions, in which the ego, or everyday self, beholds the Christ, Bodhisattvas, the Virgin Mary or Quan Yin (the Buddhist goddess of compassion), or any other impressive presence in the pantheon of gods and goddesses, or abstract symbols, such as precious metals, gemstones and light itself, typically occur just prior to, or following, the emergence of mystical forms of consciousness. The term “mystical”, strictly and technically used in the psychology of religion, refers to states of awareness beyond the ego, or the subject-object dichotomy of perception. The term “archetypal”, which echoes back to Philo through Carl Jung (1959), refers to “foundation stones of the psychic structure”, perhaps the innately symbolic “furnishings of the mind.”

Where the archetypes “come from” is a mystery. Perhaps they are genetically encoded, or spiritually accessed. As people are known to encounter archetypes foreign to their personal enculturation, we know that more is involved than the particular person’s belief system or readings in the literature of comparative religions. Anyone who works with entheogens quickly learns that Locke’s idea of our minds being *tabula rasa* at birth—sheets of paper white, on which anyone may write—is woefully inadequate. It may well be that the infant in the crib not only is seeing mental images of teddy bears and duckies, but also visions of the Christ and of Shiva dancing. Alas, if this is true—as Wordsworth and others have suggested—the memory fades as language and ego develop.

Classical mystical experiences, which I have attempted to define elsewhere (Pahnke & Richards, 1966; Richards, 1978) in the six categories of (1) Unity, (2) Transcendence of Time and Space, (3) Intuitive Knowledge, (4) Sacredness, (5) Deeply Felt Positive Mood, and (6) Ineffability & Paradoxicality, often are called by such names as samadhi, satori, or nirvana—so-called “eastern terms.” The Christian term “The Beatific Vision” for many seems to encompass both the archetypal vision of the Christ and, for some, the experience of one’s essence being lovingly drawn in and through the vision into the unity and wisdom of the Godhead itself.

I’ve chosen to illustrate this by quoting briefly from two reports of entheogen sessions, the first by a cancer patient who received dipropyltryptamine (DPT) in conjunction with brief psychotherapy, and the second, the published report of a minister (Hart, 1968), who described archetypal and mystical experiences occasioned by lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) in the context of a period of psychotherapy in the early 1960s:

The cancer patient wrote:

[After entheogen administration] I first went to a place that seemed to completely lack the qualities of this world as we know it. I seemed to transcend time and space and I lost complete identification with the “real” world. The experience seemed to me to be as if I was going from this world back to another world before this life had occurred. The actual changing from this life to whatever was before this life seemed to be involved in a very bright silver mass of energy with very strong electrical current. Strangely enough I felt that I had been in that mass of energy at one time before. When I was there everything seemed to make sense. It was a very beautiful world, one in which love was very much a part. The basic theme that I perceived was that life continues to go on and we are basically some form of essence from a Supreme Being and we are part of that Supreme Being. I don’t have the fear of death that I once had. I have found that everyday living seems to be much more enjoyable. Small things in life that I may have overlooked I seem to appreciate now. I have a much greater and deeper understanding of other people . . . and a much greater capacity to try to fulfill other people’s needs. . . . Overall I think that I am a much more content individual, having had the great opportunity to just glimpse for a very short moment the overall thinking of God, of possibly being brought into his confidence for just a brief period, to be reassured that there is a very beautiful, loving masterful plan in this Universe for all of us.

The minister (Hart, 1968), using a more free, poetic style, wrote: Vastness. Incredible luminescent light. A different, radiant quality here, never seen before. Filled all space. Exquisite. Beyond description. Unforgettable. Magnificent power—friendly power. Then moments of flames of fire. Indestructible fire. Like Moses’ unconsumed burning bush. I could have walked through these friendly flames unharmed. Magnificent light.

Oneness. All one. In-Godness. Indescribable. Utmost. Emotionless. No self. No sensations. Self was within and without. Time gone. Space gone. Nowhere, but infinitely everywhere. No time, but eternally now. No wholly other or beyond but in it. IN the infinite. In the eternal and infinite. In mystery. Part of it. All one. This seemed an eternity or in no time.

Could see God’s view of humanity. Watching mankind destroy itself. Felt helpless to stop it. Utmost love and pity and compassion for all those suffering souls unable to see beyond their own senses, their feelings, their lusts and desires, their machines of destruction, their wars, hates and jealousies, their bodies, their five little senses. Profound love.

Then, a magnificent vision of Christ standing motionless in resplendent, radiant beauty. He had form, but I could almost see through Him; yet I was not really seeing. There was immeasurable power, love. I love Him with a profundity beyond description. I did not walk to Him but was “there”—space and time meaningless. I was bodyless, selfless. Yet I could grasp His feet and ankles.

I embraced this formless form with an infinite love. Friendly power and love filled the Light. Beyond words. Unforgettable.

A slow shifting back to the sense of being In-God, and In-Christ. They and I merged, then became separate. It makes sense out of the idea of the Trinity—three in one, separate yet one, person and non-person.

A most deep understanding of the meaning of God giving his Son to this suffering world I moved into His love-suffering and felt the cost of His life. I took on all the pain of the world, not in general, but person by person, infinitely, all mankind at once. A universal sense of the purpose of the crucifixion—the meaning, the tragedy, the profound love and pity of suffering humanity.

May I humbly suggest that Mary Hart's experience, and those of many other persons who have been blessed by profound archetypal and mystical experiences during the action of entheogens during the past few decades, merit the serious attention of psychologists of religion? Why is it that we are much more prone to quote from Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart, or Plotinus, or Shankara, than contemporary mystics? As Paul Tillich (1966, p. 81) so aptly quipped, "God has not left Himself unwitnessed."

### *Some theological reflections*

For those who might tend to devalue such experiences because their occurrence appears to have been rendered more probable by the ingestion of an entheogen, there are several fascinating thoughts with which to wrestle. One is Brother David Steindl-Rast's (2001) suggestion that entheogens may best be viewed as "sacramentals"—manifestations of nature, akin to spring water, ashes or herbs, "through which faith encounters God's power." Within this framework, they are seen as sacred molecules provided by the Creator to contribute to personal and spiritual growth. This perspective is congruent with the manner in which they are viewed by Indians, past and present, who revere them as intrinsic to their religious rituals, including the leaders of the Native American Church in the United States, who successfully have fought to retain legal access to them under our guarantee of Freedom of Religion (Smith & Snake 1996).

Another thought I would offer is that the stereotype of the everyday ego using the power of an entheogen to arrogantly crash through the gates of heaven to claim the holy grail of enlightenment, is simply "a stereotype." Many persons have taken entheogens repeatedly and never come close to experiencing profound states of consciousness, spiritual or psychodynamic, largely due a lack of understanding of the potency of variables of set and

setting, as well as factors of purity and dosage. When one approaches the opportunities afforded by the action of an entheogen with attitudes of unconditional trust, humble courage and devotion to the Sacred, transcendental experiences inevitably are experienced as gifts humbly received, as the ego, or everyday self, encounters its own death and insignificance. To those who would suggest that the experiences that occur are "cheap grace", not fueled by sufficient years of meditation and mortification, I would point to the condensed agony and personal suffering experienced by many persons as they struggle through their psychodynamic forms of resistance towards the Divine and as they view their past failings in life in the light of experiences of unconditional love. As Huston Smith (2000, p. 27) has pointed out, "Ecstasy is not fun."

Huston Smith, who many readers will recognize as a highly esteemed scholar of comparative religions, has acknowledged the significance of his own personal experiences with entheogens in his professional development, and also repeatedly has articulated the important distinction between "religious experiences" and "religious lives." Especially in the West, with our puritanical and Calvinistic heritage, we have tended to be wary of religious experiences if they do not appear to have direct applicability to social change and active involvement in the world. It could be that the "otherworldliness" and questionable relevance associated with some meditative and spiritual disciplines is the result, not of going "too deep" into the psyche, but rather the consequence of "not going deeply enough." Many meditative procedures and traditions unquestionably are very time-consuming and may provide access to very mildly altered states of consciousness much more readily than intense archetypal and mystical experiences. The compulsion to spend increasing amounts of time in search of a glimpse of Enlightenment may for some be fueled by a feeling of frustration and incompleteness of the meditative experiences themselves. This also may be a factor in the repetitive use of entheogens by persons who employ very low dosage in settings that are less than optimal, engendering an unfulfilled desire for experiences that never quite seem fully to occur.

In contrast, when relatively complete mystical experiences occur, it appears that many persons discover an intensified impetus to contribute to the historical world upon their return to normative consciousness, in harmony with the ancient "Bodhisattva Ideal" or the "Suffering Servant" theme in the Second Isaiah. Although, as expressed in the Hindu concept of *maya*, or in Neo-Platonic theory, the everyday world is perceived to be less fundamental or basic than the mystical states of consciousness, the everyday world nevertheless seems to become illumined by new beauty and meaning, and the historical dramas and interpersonal relationships in which we participate may be viewed as having their own significance. Many men and women who have glimpsed enlightened states of mind by whatever means do chop wood, carry water, and care for their brothers and



sisters in the world. It is of interest to observe that many persons who have experienced profound mystical or archetypal experiences during the action of an entheogen manifest little eagerness to repeat the experience in the short-term, typically feeling they have much to integrate and apply, here and now. It is at this point that many become motivated to pursue traditional meditative disciplines with more discipline.

### *Future frontiers in the psychology of religious experience*

Astronomy does not focus primarily on the thoughts that men have about the universe, nor about how they behave in response to the ever-changing knowledge that is being discovered about the universe; it boldly attempts to comprehend the universe itself and its laws. Awestruck as they must be at times as they peer through their telescopes, astronomers still manage to make measurements and to formulate new models of reality.

Similarly, could it be that psychologists of religion someday, in addition to studying the thoughts and behavior of people who call themselves religious, could focus on the study of Transcendence itself—the Sacred, the mystery of Revelation, the Mind of God, the Structure of Being, How God Manifests in Consciousness, perhaps even the illusive essence of Consciousness itself? Would we view such study as “profane”, or could psychologists of religion, like astronomers, humbly and appreciatively revere what is discovered? As Maslow stressed in his book *The Psychology of Science*, (1966, p. 150) “Studying the mystery does not necessarily profane it. Indeed, this is the best way towards greater respect, richer understanding, and greater sacralization and sanctification at a much higher level of richness.”

One tool in this process could be the safest of entheogens, employed in the most wise and responsible manner. Realistically, how could this occur? First, we need to determine which entheogens are most safe, for which persons they may be most safe, and how the selected substances may most wisely be made legally accessible. For now, this requires the collaboration of psychologists of religion with psychopharmacologists and medical colleagues in well-designed research projects that meet the standards, and merit the approval, of federal regulatory agencies, in the United States and in other countries. During this process, it requires incredible patience and respectful communication with colleagues who may fear that entheogens never can be employed safely and responsibly. There are many different entheogenic substances, known and yet to be synthesized, (Shulgin & Shulgin, 1991, 1997) and there are many different approaches to ensuring the safety and potential benefit of their use, most including the prior establishment of a healthy interpersonal relationship

with a guide and the incorporation of visual and auditory forms of support during the period of alternative states of consciousness.

If this were accomplished, interdisciplinary research and retreat centers could someday be established at which volunteer subjects who pass medical and psychological screening could receive entheogens. Some might apply to come to such centers for personal, spiritual reasons alone, and have little interest in research. Others might be willing to contribute to research, or choose to participate in order to foster our knowledge in this area.

For those of us who are interested in advancing knowledge and pursuing research, many questions present themselves about the nature of human consciousness and spiritual awareness, and about the laws and processes that apply as one navigates through so-called "inner space." Let me mention a few possibilities that I find especially intriguing:

If indeed, Jung's concept of the "Collective Unconscious" is not only a creative idea, but an inner realm to which all of us have potential access, it awaits further mapping and systematic exploration. It should be relatively simple to validate whether or not we really have access to experiences and images that are not part of our personal processes of enculturation. To throw out a hypothesis, I would suggest that approximately 25% of a sample of culturally-isolated Christians would experience some Hindu imagery, while the same percentage of culturally-isolated Hindu subjects would experience some Christian imagery.

Another fascinating area of potential exploration concerns the nature of visionary and mystical experiences themselves. We all know that we see things when our eyes are closed, even in nocturnal dreaming. But, dare we ask what really is going on? One intriguing suggestion has been made by Jeremy Narby (1998) who speculates that, in addition to our five externally-oriented senses, we have an internally oriented sense that somehow can perceive the stuff out of which life and consciousness is made, perhaps even DNA spirals themselves, the genes that comprise them, and the ultimate quanta that fade into the mystery of indestructible energy. Narby calls our attention to the discovery that DNA does emit light, or photons, and suggests that such light may be experienced and described by human beings if we learn to look inward. Although it is easy to dismiss such speculation as schizoid, can any of us propose an alternative model to begin to explain such phenomena? Here is a threshold of knowledge that both physicists and psychologists of religious experience could explore together.

The noetic (intuitive) insights in mystical states invariably are profound, including alleged (1) confirmation of the reality of God or whatever one's favorite noun may be for the ultimate Source or Ground of Being, (2) the indestructibility of consciousness, that is, immortality, (3) the interrelatedness of us all within consciousness, out of which the idea of the Brotherhood of Man arises, and (4) the absoluteness of truth, beauty and love—an almost absurd idea to consider in this period of philosophical relativism. Research could explore the reliability of such

insights, perhaps how they are expressed in different ways by different people and, above all, how such knowledge may engender or catalyze changes in attitudes and behavior in subsequent everyday living.

### *The current status of research*

What is the “current status” of research with entheogens? As a whole, we must admit that this entire field, bursting with possibilities, largely has been ignored, perhaps as an expression of our concerns about the drug abuse problem and the tendency of governments throughout the world to lump all drugs together and not to distinguish between them, not even between narcotics and entheogens. Actually, it is of interest to note that, when we asked heroin addicts in treatment with LSD-assisted psychotherapy to compare the two substances, they invariably stated that the two drugs stood in polar relationship to one another: whereas heroin lured one away from one’s problems and failed relationships, LSD tended to lead one directly into the heart of them, and to the growing edge of personal and spiritual growth. That is why entheogens have tended to have a bad reputation in the narcotic-abusing community as, when users have tried them and sought to escape from repressed emotions during the period of drug action, typically they have experienced so-called “bad trips”, characterized by panic and paranoia. What they have run from are their own Jungian Shadows as well as potential experiences of resolution and divine acceptance; psychological and spiritual growth demands the confrontation and befriending of the Shadow.

Entheogens have been around for at least 2000 years, if not since the dawn of man, and they have been rediscovered and then forced into the underground by many cultures. This is especially remarkable as most entheogens are considered to have very low addiction potential and negligible organic toxicity (Cohen, 1960; Gable, 1993; Strassman, 1984). It is of special interest that, in cultures that include entheogens in their religious rituals, there appears to be very little abuse of these substances. Perhaps, what we tend to fear is not the entheogens themselves, but the knowledge to which they may provide access. Perhaps we want to know truth, but not too much truth. I’m reminded of Alan Watt’s (1966) comments on “the taboo of knowing who you are.” The dangers, and the promise of these substances, when knowledgeably employed, lie in realms psychological and spiritual.

Scientists who now reapproach research with entheogens must do so with conscious respect towards the sacred realms to which they may provide access. They also need to progress in a spirit of interdisciplinary cooperation. After a quarter century of dormancy, very carefully-designed research is beginning again in some sites in Europe and the United States. There are many who share the hope that the pitfalls of the 1960s will be avoided and that research now will progress with steadiness and with wisdom. In the psychology of

religious experience and the theological frontier of “interspirituality” (Eck, 1993; Teasdale, 1999), the findings of renewed research with entheogens could prove to be of profound import in fostering intercultural understanding and world peace.

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